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AUTHOR Butler, Johnnella; Marable, Manning
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ABSTRACT

The literature of the Negro Renaissance needs to be re-examined from the purview of the pervasiveness of the conflicts apparent in such literary themes as the tragic mulatto, the glorified and idealistic African past, the alienation from American culture, and an implied, and at times overt, self-hatred. The Renaissance literature reflects the reality of the Negro as he indeed perceived himself regardless of color--the reality of the psychological mulatto. Histroically, black scholars must re-evaluate the origins of the integrationist movement. Even now most refuse to ask themselves if it was relevant to the African-American working class laborers and farmers whether or not a few Negroes got "equal opportunity" to become part of white America. Literary and other cultural aspects of the black American experience must be employed in the historiography of analyzing such questions as: Who really wanted this struggle for total assimilation in white culture and economics? Why is it that the Negro intellectuals, until recently, refused to be associated with anything "black," "revolutionary," or "African?" Unfortunately, present-day New Negroes, building on the faulty foundations of the 1920's, retard advancement of the race and deny the establishment of a legitimate black historical tradition and black literary tradition. (Author/JM)

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THE NEW NEGRO AND THE IDEOLOGICAL ORIGINS OF THE INTEGRATIONIST MOVEMENT

JOHNNELLA BUTLER, INSTRUCTOR, AFRO-AMERICAN LITERATURE
DEPARTMENT OF AFRO-AMERICAN STUDIES
SMITH COLLEGE, NORTHAMPTON, MASSACHUSETTS

MANNING MARABLE, LECTURER, AFRO-AMERICAN HISTORY
DEPARTMENT OF AFRO-AMERICAN SUTDIES
SMITH COLLEGE, NORTHAMPTON, MASSACHUSETTS

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Don L. Lee, "New Integrationists"

The Negro Renaissance literature and the ideology of militant integrationists of the 1920s formed the basis of the first organized, large-scale movement for assimilation. The Negro intellectuals in literature and politics mutually reinforced each other; they were proud of being Negroes, yet they desperately sought a role within American society. Their philosophy produced contradictions and denials of their African heritage and their quasi-African culture. The integration movement of the 1920s and the subsequent Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, as a result of the inherent contradictions and denials, served as a cathartic release, thereby negating the potential for forging a meaningful political, economic, and artistic existence for the African-American.

The black people who survived the rigors of Southern slavery were more African than Anglo-Saxon. Parents and grandparents, by recalling stories and images of Africa, fostered a worldview grounded in a communal spirit, which the system of slavery did not obliterate. Blacks retained stable extended family relations that existed with great difficulty on the plantations.[1] The agrarian skills of planting, cattleraising, and fishing which blacks as slaves had instructed their masters remained with African-Americans.[2] Black agriculturalists united in political and economic movements after Reconstruction to

oppose rising racism and to gain self-sufficiency. Black peasants of the 1890s who farmed in Dixie's cotton belt dreamed of owning their own land and of controlling their own political systems as their grandparents had in Africa.[3] The wide support for Pap Singleton's and Henry McNeal Turner's black nationalist proposals is an indication of the Africaness of black people.[4]

The ascendance of a capitalist political-economy, racial repression, and the influence of urban society upon American life did not destroy the African ideals and spirit of black people. In increasing numbers, blacks worked in mining and transportation industries in the South's new industrial communities. Black men and women sold their labor power to a new business elite who desired maximized profits under the most brutal conditions.[5] In the urban North, whites aggressively forced African-Americans into ghettos, nullified their civil rights and extended "Jim Crow" to schools and public accommodations.[6] The "Southern Way" of race relations rapidly became the "American Way."[7] Unlike other immigrant working-class minorities, the African-American did not lose his culture during the immediate transition from rural to urban life and labor. Some social institutions, like the black church, were less influential within urban communities than they had been in the South; however, in many Northern working class areas, despite harsh economic and racial pressures, the black family did not disintegrate. Work habits, family patterns, music, and other elements of culture retained the African continuum. Black laborers clung to precapitalist attitudes and concepts, rejecting the lifestyle of the modern white worker.[8]

African aspects of black culture and white racist restrictions encouraged many African-Americans to advocate self-help and nationalistic ideologies. Behind the rhetoric of black accommodation and political moderation, Booker Washington sought to create independent black social and economic

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institutions. The supporters of his Negro Business League were not wedded to the white community as the free Negroes of Frederick Douglass's era had been. Black capitalism, grounded in African-American self-help efforts, was a logical, although ultimately self-destructive, program of conservative protest in a bourgeois society.[9] In a similar but more militant fashion, the African-American supporters of Marcus Garvey urged blacks to associate themselves spiritually with Africa. Like the Negro Business League, Garvey's Negro Factories Corporation served to support black petty bourgeois efforts of self-sufficiency.[10] Both Garvey and Washington were proud of their blackness; both men were able to generate African protest movements in this country and in Africa itself. Participation in American society was secondary. Their primary efforts were geared to the immediate needs of the African-American community.[11]

Leading critics of Washington and Garvey repudiated the tactics of self-help and the principles of domestic black nationalism and voluntary segregation. In 1903, W.E.B. DuBois observed that Washington's program was opposed to the "ideal of ultimate freedom and assimilation" which Frederick Douglass had championed. His Souls of Black Folk stated persuasively that blacks owed as much to white America as they did to their motherland; however, he further stated that blacks should "not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa." America, according to DuBois, had given the world a new man, the Negro, who was neither black nor white. "One ever feels his two-ness," DuBois stated, "an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body. . . ." Beyond his call for academic education and a "talented-tenth," DuBois urged blacks to work for "the greater ideals of the American Republic. . . . We fought their battles, shared their sorrow, /and/ mingled our blood with theirs. . . ." Arguing that the Negro should be proud of his African past, but should also determinedly seek integration as a means to ultimate freedom, DuBois asked,

"Would America have been America without her Negro people?" To DuBois, African-American leaders during the slave revolts and throughout history sought chiefly "ultimate assimilation through self assertion. . . ." The Negro was certainly white and American as well as black.[12]

The Negro Renaissance, the first recognized and massive effort of African-Americans to define, analyze, and criticize the race's relationship to American society, primarily accepted and became the logical extension of DuBois' stated contradiction as reflected in Alain Locke's concept of the New Negro. It was the business of the New Negro who had shaken off the "aunt" and "uncle" stereotypes to capitalize upon the similar conditions of his brothers and, glorying in their diverse consciousness, become Americanized. The assumption of this posture placed the African-American in the position of reactor, and seldom, if ever, as an initiator of action. He became, to paraphrase author Ralph Ellison, invisible to white America, who by virtue of their failure of recognition are sleepwalkers unaware of the subjected, hidden potency of the invisible people except through the expression of rage against a greater invisibility.[13]

The writers of the Renaissance, in conveying the people, life-styles, aspirations, scenes, and events of the Harlem of the Twenties, have, perhaps unwittingly, left us a record of the personal aspects of the Negroes' struggle in his quest for acceptance by and full participation in American society. That the bulk of the Renaissance literature is an exponent of the intelligentsia, that political disunity rather than solidarity prevailed, that the literary artists did not emerge from the lower class of the masses, does not negate the importance of the Renaissance as indicator of the African-American's role as reactor and the inherent questioning of self-worth leading to undercurrents of self-denial, both of which fostered the integrationist approach to the American

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race problem which gained its political foothold during the Renaissance and thrived with few challenges until the mid-sixties. Hence, true to form, the Negro Renaissance--its promulgation fortunately occurring at a time when the white literary world sanctioned and encouraged Negro literary expression--may be seen as a response to and a verbalization of the frustration and sense of self-failure the African-American encountered.

Langston Hughes, more than others, captured this frustration in its many guises. He wrote of the Negro migrant who brought his "one-way ticket" to the Promised Land, and found, upon arrival that:

> ... the
> trains are late.
> The gates open--
> but there're bars
> at each gate.
>
> ("One-Way Ticket")

He examines the piercing alienation of the mulatto who wonders "where /he's/ gonna dies, being neither white or black," who perhaps loves "Bessie, Bach, and bop," or who feels societal pressure to deny one or several of his heritages in favor of another. ("Theme for English B"). Langston Hughes, Nella Larsen, Jessie Fauset, Walter White and other Renaissance artists in poetry as well as other genres exhausted the theme of the tragic mulatto earlier touched upon by writers such as Charles Chestnutt, William Wells Brown and most thoroughly treated by James Weldon Johnson in the Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man (written in 1912, however, the authorship of which he did not acknowledge until 1927). They uniquely explored the pitfalls and ironies inherent in the physical mulatto's attempts to pass for white. Central to the tragic mulatto theme is a denial of self in that the tragic flaw or Achilles' heel is the possibility of the discovery of the mulatto's damning blackness.

In reacting to America, in attempting to become Americanized, the

African-American sought no definition of himself in terms of his heritage, but rather, in terms of America--the supposed conglomeration of selves to yield a new self to fit the American puzzle. Indeed, James Weldon Johnson asserts in his autobiography, Along This Way, that the solution of the race problem involves the salvation of the white man's soul and the black body, thereby suggesting the black man's material destiny to be solely dependent upon the spiritual (an obviously higher) disposition of white America.[14]

Countee Cullen explored in "Heritage" the contradictions of Christianity and Western culture which confronted the African-American:

> Not yet has my heart or head
> In the least way realized
> They and I are civilized.
>
> ("Heritage")

He did not however admit to the possibility of an African continuum. Instead, he romanticized Africa as a haunting enigma to the Negro American. Further in "Heritage" he recognized and attempted to accept an ambivalent, superficial, exotic, passionate, mysterious concept of Africa as the mother country, not seeking to affirm its worth but simply to exclaim to the world that Africa is just as good as any other mother country. The dream deferred affects them all--the rural to urban migrant, the mulatto obsessed with finding a sense of belonging, the African-American longing to grasp his tradition who contents himself with being, as Cullen states in "Heritage":

> One three centuries removed
> From the scenes his fathers loved,
> Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
> What is Africa to me?

As Leroi Jones argues in "The Myth of a Negro Literature," a literature fraught with responding to and imitating white culture resulted, and an atmosphere of self-denial, inaffirmation of their aspirations, demanded a negation of the past, the African heritage--themselves.[15] Assuming that his essence

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found roots in Western culture, the African-American created a literature and a life-style largely a sham.

Jean Toomer, perhaps ostracized for the very recognition of the necessity for the African-American to seek his unique heritage, produced in Cane a literary work outstanding in that he captured the essence of the African-American's dilemma. Especially in "Kabnis," he works with "two warring ideals" and sadly suggests the truth: the only alternative to becoming inert within the ambivalence and contradiction is to succumb to the overwhelming force of American dominance and accept the subsequent limitations.

Throughout the 1920s, the N.A.A.C.P. elite stressed the feelings of racial ambivalence expressed in Renaissance work. Just prior to the "Red Summer" of 1919, DuBois acknowledged in The Crisis, the N.A.A.C.P.'s official publication, that America "lynches," "disfranchises its own citizens," "encourages ignorance," and it "keeps us consistently and universally poor." Yet this genocidal nation was "our fatherland," DuBois declared. The Negro who served during World War I fought "for America and her highest ideals. . . ."[16] Locke described the New Negro and his social role in American life in a very similar manner. The New Negro was "an integral part of the large industrial and social problems of our present-day democracy." The Negro while segregated was "cramped and fetter/ed/." The Negro mind reaches out for "American wants, American ideals /and for the/ fullest sharing of American culture and institutions." Both DuBois and Locke applauded liberal America's foreign and domestic triumphs through their campaign for ultimate political and cultural assimilation. Especially in Locke's writings, democracy and integration encouraged a denial of indigenous black cultural prerogatives.[17]

African-American scholars lent their support to those who denied the

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Africaness of black people. E. Franklin Frazier, Director of Howard University's Sociology Department in 1934, and Charles S. Johnson, Sociologist and Editor of the Urban League's Opportunity magazine, re-interpreted black culture into an integrationist framework. Frazier's 1925 article, "Social Equality and the Negro," denounced coluntary segregation and the concept of a unique, self-sufficient African-American culture.[18] Frazier's The Negro Family in the United States argued further that enslavement and white oppression had destroyed African social institutions. Black folk culture was "low," "ignorant," and "inferior."[19] Like other New Negroes, Frazier applauded the demise of the agrarian standards within black life and the Negro's migration into the urban setting. Johnson generally agreed with Frazier. At best, the Negro was a "marginal man"--a creature who was part black and part white, partially primitive and rural, partially urban and progressive. Integration, not separation, Johnson declared, would bring blacks salvation.[20]

Negro civil rights activists stressed assimilation not as a means for African-Americans to attain equality but as an ultimate goal itself. Walter White, Executive Secretary of the N.A.A.C.P., organized legal attempts to desegregate white universities but scorned attempts to build separate black educational institutions.[21] James Weldon Johnson, as N.A.A.C.P. Secretary, incorporated the contradictions of the Renaissance and translated them into political realities and responses to white oppression. Although Johnson recognized the unique character of Negro culture, he criticized conservative black nationalists who "expect/ed/ the Negro in Harlem or anywhere else to build business in general upon a strictly racial foundation. . . ."[22]

White, Johnson and others with the N.A.A.C.P. leadership ranks stressed a program which would ultimately destroy the African-American spirit of solidarity and racial integrity. When their ideological mentor, DuBois,

defended an all-black economic cooperative commonwealth for African-Americans and criticized liberal America's economic, political and cultural values, the N.A.A.C.P. black and white elite had little choice but to force him out of the organization and condemn him.[23]

The Negro intellectuals and the N.A.A.C.P. hierarchy never supported black cultural nationalism; instead, they drew heavily from those ambivalences evident in the Renaissance's literary works and politics.[24] As the Renaissance lacked a cultural philosophy autonomous from white America, so did the new urban political leadership of the African-Americans.[25] While Africans had been agrarians and deeply conscious of their cultural integrity, New Negroes glorified the city and urban life, supported progressive legislation for integration, and declared war on those who doubted the wisdom of ultimate assimilation. Just as artists such as Hughes and Cullen called out desperately for opportunities in white American culture, the leadership of subsequent civil rights movements in the 1950s and 1960s would demand opportunities for upward mobility within a capitalist American society, which, by its aggressive and exploitative nature, could never yield equality to the African-American.

In summation, the literature of the Negro Renaissance needs to be re-examined from the purview of the pervasiveness of the conflicts apparent in such literary themes as the tragic mulatto, the glorified and idealistic African past, the alienation from American culture, and an implied, and at times overt, self-hatred. The Renaissance literature reflects the reality of the Negro as he indeed perceived himself regardless of color--the reality of the psychological mulatto. Historically, black scholars must re-evaluate the origins of the integrationist movement. Even now most refuse to ask themselves if it was relevant to the African-American working class laborers and farmers whether or not a few Negroes got "equal opportunity" to become part of white

America. Literary and other cultural aspects of the black American experience must be employed in the historiography of analyzing such questions as: Who really wanted this struggle for total assimilation into white culture and economics? Why is it that the Negro intellectuals, until recently, refused to be associated with anything "black," "revolutionary," or "African?" Why do Negro scholars of sociology and history charge that the institution of slavery destroyed the black family, sense of community and cosmology, and then proclaim that the African-American's struggle for survival in the urban ghetto has been the product of a long march toward "freedom," "democracy," and "integration?" Unfortunately, present-day New Negroes, building upon the faulty foundations of the Twenties, retard the political and artistic advancement of the race and deny the establishment of a legitimate black historical tradition and black literary tradition.[26]

NOTES

[1]John Blassingame, The Slave Community (New York, 1973), passim; Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, Time On The Cross, Volume I: The Economics of American Negro Slavery (Boston: 1974), passim; Eugene D. Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made (New York: 1974), passim; Sterling Stuckey, "Through the Prism of Folklore: The Black Ethos in Slavery," The Massachusetts Review, 9, 3 (Summer, 1968), 417-437; also see Lawrence W. Levine, "Slave Songs and Slave Consciousness: An Exploration in Neglected Sources," in Anonymous Americans, ed., Tamara Hareven (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: 1971).

[2]Peter Wood's Black Majority (New York: 1974) and Genovese's Roll, Jordan, Roll illustrate that both in colonial and antebellum times blacks were not reactors to white oppression, but largely established their own work habits.

[3]Edwin S. Redkey, Black Exodus: Black Nationalist and Back to Africa Movements, 1890-1910 (New Haven: 1969).

[4]On "Pap" Singleton's emigrationist movement to Kansas, see August Meier, Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915 (Ann Arbor: 1965), 271-74. On Turner, see Redkey, Respect Black: The Writings and Speeches of Henry McNeal Turner (New York: 1971).

[5]Charles H. Wesley, Negro Labor in the United States, 1850-1925 (New York: 1931) and Robert S. Starobin, Industrial Slavery in the Old South (New York: 1970) discuss black labor in capitalist enterprises.

[6]Allan Spear, "The Origins of the Urban Ghetto, 1870-1915," in Nathan I. Huggins, Martin Kilson, Daniel M. Fox, eds., Key Issues in the Afro-American Experience, Volume II (New York: 1971), 153-166; Gilbert Osofsky, "The Enduring Ghetto," Journal of American History, 40 (September, 1968).

[7]C. Vann Woodward, Origins of the New South (Baton Rouge: 1951), passim.

[8]Herbert G. Gutman, "Persistent Myths About the American Negro Family," Paper read at the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, Birmingham, Alabama, 10 October 1969.

The central difficulty here is that historically African cultural carryovers are extremely difficult to extract from many traditional studies on black folk culture. It is still controversial to argue that the heritage of black life in the South was in any real way "African." In large degree, such standard interpretations reflect the integrationist demands upon Twentieth Century scholarship, and unduly slight the work of Melville Herskovits. The best general attempt to critique the overall African continuum within modern bourgeois American society is Harold Cruse's The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual (New York: 1967).

[9]W.E.B. DuBois, Dusk of Dawn (New York: 1940), 204; Robert Allen, Black Awakening in Capitalist America: An Analytic History (Garden City, N.Y.: 1970), 94-99; Eugene D. Genovese, "The Legacy of Slavery and the Roots of Black Nationalism," Studies on the Left, 6 (November-December, 1966), 14-16.

[10]Amy Jacques Garvey, ed., The Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey, two volumes (New York: 1923, 1925), passim; Theodore G. Vincent, Black Power and the Garvey Movement (San Francisco: 1972), Chapter 5; E. U. Essien-Udom, Black Nationalism (New York: 1962), 50-51.

[11]For example, Washington's business and political attitudes formed the basis of the African nationalist protest ideology in early-twentieth century South Africa. See Manning Marable, "Booker Washington and African Nationalism," to be published in Phylon, late 1974-early 1975. Also see K. J. King, Pan Africanism and Education (Oxford: 1971), 12, 98, 262; Manning Marable, "A Black School in South Africa," Negro History Bulletin, 37, 4 (June/July, 1974), 258-261.

[12]W.E.B. DuBois, The Souls of Black Folk (New York: 1903).

[13]See "Prologue," Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man (New York: 1951).

[14]James Weldon Johnson, Along This Way (New York: 1933), 318.

[15]Leroi Jones, "The Myth of a Negro Literature," and "A Dark Bag," Home (New York: 1969); Don L. Lee, Dynamite Voices (Detroit: 1971), 15.

[16]W.E.B. DuBois, The Crisis, 18 (May, 1919), 13-14.

[17]Alain Locke, The New Negro (New York: 1925).

[18]E. Franklin Frazier, "Social Equality and the Negro," Opportunity, 3 (June: 1925), 165-168.

[19](Chicago: 1932).

[20]See Charles S. Johnson, A Preface to Racial Understanding (New York: 1936).

[21]Walter F. White, A Man Called White (New York: 1948).

[22]James Weldon Johnson, Black Manhattan (New York: 1930), 283.

[23]W.E.B. DuBois, Dusk of Dawn, 296-317. During the depression of the nineteen thirties, DuBois embraced black nationalism and the immediate need for separate black economic, political and cultural development:

> " From the eighteenth century down the Negro intelligentsia has regarded segregation as the visible badge of their servitude and as the object of their unceasing attack. The upper class Negro has almost never been nationalistic. He has never planned or thought of a Negro state or a Negro church or a Negro school. This solution has always been a thought up-surging from the mass, because of pressure which they could not withstand and which compelled a racial institution or chaos. Continually such institutions were founded and developed, but this took place against the advice and best thought of the intelligentsia."
>
> DuBois, Dusk of Dawn, 305

[24]Few upper class Negroes, excluding James Weldon Johnson and W.E.B. DuBois, took an active interest in promulgating Negro culture. However, some liberal whites within the N.A.A.C.P. did offer literary prizes through the Crisis.

[25]Harold Cruse, The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual, 38.

[26]Donald B. Gibson, "Is There a Clack Literary Tradition?" New York University Education Quarterly, 11, 2 (Winter, 1971), 12-16; Addison Gayle, The Black Aesthetic, (Garden City, New York: 1972), passim; also see Leroi Jones, Home and Don L. Lee, Dynamite Voices.